

MARY McGRORY

The Incurious Nominee

Policemen are, as a type, suspicious; they are paid to be. But not the country's top cop, William H. Webster, the FBI director who is up to be director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

He is a trusting soul who sees white hats on everyone in government.

Because he has a reputation for straight-arrow decency and honesty, he is regarded as a model government official in the Reagan regime. He is also handsome and agreeable, and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence is dying to confirm him.

But Webster's curious lack of curiosity about odd doings all around him caused many wrinkled brows, even among Republicans, especially after senators received a Justice Department memo provided by the Iran-contra independent counsel about Lt. Col. Oliver L. North that the FBI director initialed, but cannot remember.

The memo recommends that the FBI withhold information—which, it was said, was available in newspapers—from North. Some Justice Department officials “speculated” that the high-flying Marine, who was generalissimo of the contras, might someday be the target of an independent counsel.

Webster kept saying in his bland way that he didn't think the memo was important. But it nagged at the senators for a number of reasons.

One was that Webster had his doubts about North. His deputy, Oliver B. Revell, came back from National Security Council meetings with misgivings about what transpired at North's operations subgroup.

Webster “entertained some unease,” he said, but he asked no questions.

He brought up with Attorney General Edwin Meese III troubling aspects of North's pyrotechnic personality—his gung-ho attitude, his “tunnel vision.” Nothing came of these discussions.

Last August, when Webster first heard of the arms sales to Iran from the attorney general, he asked only if there had been “a presidential finding” to cover the fact that the congressional intelligence committees had not been informed, as the law requires. Told there was a finding, he seemed content.

Last Nov. 21, Meese gave Webster the outlines of the explosive second chapter of the story, the diversion of the arms profits to aid the Nicaraguan contras. Webster offered the help of the FBI in “getting to the bottom of it,” the professed goal of all the president's

men and the president himself. The attorney general declined the offer. Webster thought nothing of it. Meese was the chief gumshoe on the case.

“I was thinking mainly in terms of manpower and resources,” Webster, a former federal judge, explained earnestly. “He was thinking of fact-finding.” It never crossed Webster's mind that Reagan's fiercest defender might not do everything by the book.

He was asked if the FBI would have done a better job of the inquiry. “I don't think we are in a position yet to answer that question,” he replied. “The down side would be sending FBI agents into the White House when there was no known criminal activity to investigate.”

Since then, we have seen North take the Fifth Amendment and learned, courtesy of his former secretary, Fawn Hall, that NSC documents were shredded or altered before the FBI made the scene on Nov. 26.

Webster kept the faith, however. On Dec. 14, he told the press that the G-men had “found no evidence of the destruction of documents.”

Senate intelligence panel Chairman David L. Boren (D-Okla.), sometimes regarded as a country boy himself, said, “This seems to be a very naive approach. You were simply relying on the good offices of the people under suspicion.”

The CIA may be rubbing its hands in glee at the prospect of Webster's advent. Despite his uprightness, he seems no threat to dedicated spooks who wish to go on conducting covert operations with the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door. He does not have an inquiring mind. Their secrets are safe.

“I am not an investigative expert,” he told the senators redundantly.

Skepticism is not in his nature, as regards skullduggery in the White House. After Eugene Hasenfus' arms-bearing plane was shot down over Nicaragua on Oct. 5, the FBI began a probe of Southern Air Transport Inc., the company that denied ownership of the plane. On Oct. 30, Webster was asked by Meese to delay the investigation for 10 days. Webster was happy to oblige. The same day he got the memo advising him to cut off information from North. Did he smell a rat—or think the two events were related? Certainly not.

Webster is from Missouri, the “Show Me” state; but nobody showed him anything in the Iran-contra scandal that could speak to the policeman in him. Only drug dealers and car thieves can do that, it seems.

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CORRECTIONS

FBI Director William H. Webster learned of the diversion of Iran arms sales profits to the contras on Nov. 25, not Nov. 21 as reported in Mary McGrory's column in yesterday's editions.
